DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 767 EA 026 511

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TITLE The Educational Voucher: Are We Ready for It?
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Educational Equity (Finance); Educational Opportunities; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Free Enterprise System; *School Choice; *Tuition Grants

ABSTRACT

This paper examines arguments in favor of and against the use of educational vouchers as an alternative educational system. A review of literature concludes that some problems to be addressed include religion, ethnic equity, finance allocation, and transportation. It is argued that the free market creates competition, but not equal opportunity. Public charter schools may provide a better alternative for providing the necessary balance between choice and regulation. Notes contain seven references. (LMI)

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ED 379 767

THE EDUCATIONAL VOUCHER: ARE WE READY FOR IT?

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Fall, 1994

EA 026 511

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Are We Ready For Vouchers?

Problem

During the 1980's, many United States' citizens became frustrated with our nation's public school system. The negative attention was brought about by several national reports which stated that our public schools were in bad shape. America's public schools appeared to be losing their competitive edge, and some people searched for a solution.

In the past ten years, millions of dollars have been poured into public schools, especially urban schools. These attempts have failed to correct the public school system. Some people are now suggesting that instead of trying to improve the schools directly, why not give the students an opportunity to choose a better school? This concept of choice could be accomplished by educational vouchers.

Educational vouchers are financial entitlements distributed to the student's parents by the government. The money that once went to the school will now be advanced directly to the parents. The parents will spend this allotted money to send their child (student) to a school of their choice. The amount of money that each voucher is worth depends on which voucher proposal is utilized.

> According to Friedman, the voucher plan would improve education by (1) giving parents greater freedom to choose a desirable educational program for their children, (2) doing away with the educational monopoly of public education, and (3) increasing competition among schools so that both public and private institutions become more effective and efficient.1

Vouchers would turn our public school system into an open, competitive market. Some people encourage this voucher system while others would like to prevent any voucher proposal.

Review of the Literature

Two of the first educational financiers to propose vouchers were Adam Smith and Stuart Mill. "Smith believed that parents, if given the opportunity, will do a better job of educating their children than the state."2 The concept of vouchers never took hold. In the late 1950's economist Milton Friedman began publicizing the idea of tuition vouchers.

> Friedman proposed that inefficiencies of public education could be corrected through a competitive, free market system that gave parents money and complete freedom of choice in selecting schools for their children.3

A competitive system would force schools to improve in order to attract students. Despite Friedman's promotion of vouchers, the system has yet to be adopted. During the 1980's, the public school system was scrutinized and therefore attracted much criticism. Recently, for some, vouchers have become the answer to the public school's problems.

There are several voucher proposals because of the complexity of the choice situation. Before selecting a voucher proposal, Coons and Sugarman suggest examining the numerous considerations that are involved. Will vouchers be redeemable at private as well as public schools? Tyack argues school choice plans should be limited to public schools. He indicates that "a system of controlled choice will eliminate many problems associated with school choice will eliminate many problems associated with school choice."4 Attempting to mesh private and public schools would be difficult for several reasons. The problem is that public schools are managed by the government

while the private schools govern themselves. Private schools determine their own curriculum, hiring procedures, admission requirements, and tuition. If vouchers can be cashed in at private schools, many of the private schools' policies will have to regulated to ensure that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation does not occur. A regulation would have to be arranged to inhibit schools from "skimming" only bright students and "dumping" all the slow students.5 Also, if private and public schools are involved in the voucher plan, private schools will have to regulate some state policies. If this occurs, will "government operated (public) schools be freed from regulations not imposed on private schools?"6

Vouchers in private and public schools brings about the issue of religion. For example, it is reported that "85 percent of American private elementary and secondary schools are religious."7 Government vouchers sent to private and predominantly religious schools will be seen as a form of public aid for religious instruction.

> In a 1971 decision of Lemon v. Kurtzman, the U.S. Supreme Court developed a three prong test concerning the establishment of religion in education.8

Because of the Lemon case, most new public aid for religious schools was denied because it failed one part of the three prong test.

> Opponents say vouchers and tax credit plans in particular are a clear violation of the First Amendment prohibition of the establishment of religion, better known as the establishment clause-the basic underlying principle behind most church-state controversies in education. Proponents claim that voucher and tax credit programs do not violate the establishment because the money is give to the parents and not directly to the private schools.9

Those in favor of vouchers compare the voucher system to government programs of the past and present. The National School Lunch

Act (1946), National Defense Education Act (1957), and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) are examples of past federal legislation designed to financially aid public and private schools. At the present time, the G.I. bill and Old Age Pension are providing funds to many Americans. Advocates of vouchers consider the G.I. bill and vouchers to be similar, but the issue of religion is a major obstruction to vouchers.10

Another voucher problem concerns money. Does every public school student receive money or only the very poor students? Are special education and bilingual students compensated? How much of each student's tuition will be paid? Will families who normally send their children to private schools be eligible for a voucher or tuition reimbursement?

Farnan believes in the half tuition principle. This rule would enforce parents of children on a voucher to pay a portion of the tuition. The half tuition principle would be an important feature of the voucher system. "First of all, money is spread out to cover a greater number of children."11 Therefore, more children could receive a voucher. Second and most important, all parents will be forced to pay a portion of their child's tuition and therefore become more involved in their children's education.12 This rule would compel people on welfare to find a job in order to send their child to a better school.

Transportation, under any voucher system, will be difficult. There must be some guidelines or boundaries on what schools parents can select. Orchestrating bus schedules and routes would be very complicated under the voucher system.

"Tax payer funding for school vouchers has so far been defeated almost every where it has been proposed."13 Presidents Reagan and Bush have attempted to pass voucher bills. Their efforts have been unsuccessful because

Congress in opposed to voucher proposals on the basis of the American belief in the separation of church and state. Clinton does not support school choice programs that include private schools.14

Opinion

The U.S. public school system must improve to confront the difficulties of the future. However, vouchers are likely not the answer because they are complicated and require oversight of public funds. Shannon contends that Americans shouldn't permit our public schools fall to the "disorder of the economic market place that most recently gave us junk bonds, S&L bailouts, and the strange regulation of the TV cable industry."15 The free market does create competition. The free market is not equality and likely is discriminatory. Will all students be provided an equal opportunity to learn in a free market educational system?

If vouchers do become a reality, all parties involved will have to compromise on the issues. There will have to be a balance between choice and regulation. Religion, ethnic equity, money, and transportation are just a few of the issues that must be addressed. Vouchers will create problems. The problems can be solved. The question is "Are we ready for vouchers?" Perhaps public charter schools will be our current answer.

NOTES

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